

Ralph J. Bunch Legacy: Minority Officers

AMBASSADOR MERCER COOK

Interviewed by: Ruth Stutts Njiiri

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Q: This is an interview with Ambassador Mercer Cook as part of the Phelps-Stokes Fund's oral history project on former Black Chiefs of Mission, funded by the Ford Foundation. Ambassador Cook served in Niger from 1961 to 1964, in Senegal from 1964 to 1966, and in The Gambia from 1965 to 1966.

Ambassador Cook, what were the events which led to your entry into the diplomatic service?

COOK: That's a long story, Ms. Njiiri, and you'll have to give me a little latitude, first of all, because at my age, memories are not always as bright, so crystal clear. When one reaches the age of seventy-eight, I think he has, well, he expects, to, to be forgetful. I will try to freshen them up as best I can. But as I say, this goes back a long way, this business of the Foreign Service.

I finished college in 1925, and I believe that Foreign Service was a field that I would have chosen had it been open to us at that time. But there was then only one post available; that was Liberia. One of my classmates in high school had joined the Foreign Service - his name was Bill George - and they kept him in Liberia until, for so long, that it shortened his career and it shortened his life. It was not a very healthy place at that time, apparently.

So when I finished college there wasn't any possibility of Foreign Service. My field was foreign languages, especially the Romance Languages, and in particular, French. What could I do with French since the Foreign Service was closed to people of my complexion? Well, I could teach; I could teach French. I had plenty of respect for French culture, for French civilization, for French literature particularly, but I also wanted something that I could use as a handle to interest more of our black students (we didn't say black in those days so often) but to interest them, anyhow, in people of their background who used the language even if only officially.

And so at the time of my first visit to France, right after I finished college, for a year at the University of Paris, I started in trying to find out what the Frenchman had written about blacks, about Africans, about the West Indians. And at first, at that time, there were very few, if any, blacks who had written in French. Oh, I suppose the most famous was, was Alexandre Dumas, both the father, the elder, and the son. But in 1921, while I was in college, there was one man from Guiana, René Maran, who had won the top French literary prize for his novel, *Batouala*. Yet, that gave me a starting point, a starting point, and so through the years I worked first of all on what the white Frenchman had written about blacks and then ... as others than René Maran appeared on the scene, I made it a point to find out what they were writing that I could pass on to my students in a way to stimulate them and to make them realize that there was a practical close-to-home value in the study of this strange language that I was attempting to teach them.

Well, eventually, this brought me into contact with many in my travels, which were deliberate, brought me in contact with many of the writers whose numbers grew, increased through the years until the point of 1956 when the, for example, I should - I'm ahead of my story - I should add that I worked in Haiti for two years as supervisor of an English-teaching project there. And this gave me a chance to get to know the younger Haitian writers and the older ones who were still living. And so another trip, thanks to a different fellowship, enabled me to go to Martinique and Guadeloupe, where I met the people in those places.

Later on, connections with the American Society of African Culture enabled me to go to Africa and to see there what the, these young people who were on the threshold of independence were writing and thinking. In 1956, as I said, there was the First Congress of Negro, oh, I guess we'd say, Black Writers and Artists. That was held in Paris, and I was fortunate enough to get there as a member of the delegation from this country. And this, as I say, put me in touch with people. I even met for the first time a black from the Belgian Congo, which it was called then, and we all wondered how in the world he could get out to, out of the country to come to Paris and participate in such a meeting. Well, this gave me, as I say, an increased interest and much more extensive knowledge of the people, of their ideas, because we felt that we knew that this was the beginning of an age, a new age. The same group - or most of the members of the same group - met three years later in Rome. You notice that so far there had been no meetings on African soil. But they would come; they would come later; and they're still continuing.

Well, when a new President came in, the young, vibrant John F. Kennedy, he asked around for, for people who would be recommended, for blacks who would be recommended for posts in the diplomatic service. And it seems that my name was on lots of the lists, and that's how I got into the Foreign Service. That answers your first question, and I hope I didn't take too long.

Q: No. That was fine.

COOK: But I'm sure I left out lots.

Q: What were your first impressions of Niger, Senegal, and The Gambia?

COOK: Well, first of all, I think we should ... remember that I was never a resident ambassador in The Gambia. Gambia geographically is really a little country. At that time, in 1955, they had a population of 300,000 people, and geographically it's within the realm of Senegal, really. Many of the people speak the same language, Wolof, and the Wolof that's spoken in Dakar can be understood in Bathurst. So I was never a resident there. I was simply ... on call and I guess I went to The Gambia about, only about three times during the year that I was ... ah, fulfilling that or trying to fulfill that obligation.

Niger? I was the first U.S. resident Ambassador to Niamey, the capital, and it was a poor country. It was a country that very few people over here knew about. A large country the size of California and Texas combined; that's a lot of land. And when I got the notice of the nomination, I was in Paris, and they said in the message that there was a man, a sort of a specialist, who could brief me on Niger. So I went to the U.S. Embassy in Paris and I saw a Randy Kidder, who was political officer, and I said, "I was told that you could brief me on Niger." He said, "Well," he said, "I spent a night in the airport at Niamey and I visited the museum in Niamey. So, I guess that would qualify me as an expert on ... (laughs) ... on Niger." So there wasn't too much information about Niger.

It was a, as I say, it's a country, at that time the population was about three or four million. It's a landlocked country bordered by such countries as Libya and Chad and Dahomey, which is now Benin, and very little rain, very little moisture, even though the Niger River flows through a part of the country. It's a poor country. Its money came from, at that time, almost exclusively from peanuts, although there were possibilities for cattle and in the north-the Nigeriens -I'd better use the French term there to keep from confusing it with the big country, Nigeria, which, of course, is another neighbor of Niger. The people of Niger ... of Niger ... the Nigeriens, suspected that the French had found something valuable in the north. Later on it turned out to be uranium. Ah ... but it was ... a desperately poor country, but a friendly country, hospitable. There was so much poverty, really, and the people were so generous and so hospitable that you reached a point where you would never admire anything in their homes or huts, because if you admired it, perhaps the next day they would send it to you as a gift.

Another idea of the poverty of Niger, and there was lots of illness, medical facilities were almost nonexistent. There were a number of, well, in Niamey, the capital, there was an American Baptist group that had a small clinic. Elsewhere in the country they had a leprosarium. But my wife who had, who was a former social worker, and I went there shortly after our arrival in Niamey and we found a long line of people, would-be patients, and we went in and the nurse in charge was desperate; she was almost frantic. She said, "We've just given away our last aspirin tablet and we won't get anymore until the end of the month." Well, the social worker, my wife, immediately got to work and she did a tremendous job. I'm sure she was a better ambassador than I was. She raised something like \$30,000 worth of medical supplies from different groups, white and black, in the United States, and that I think was one of my warmest memories of what I had been able to contribute to that, to that country.

My job, I suppose I should go on from there, my job, particularly, was to get to know the people and to see what I could do, if anything, to alleviate some of that poverty, and, obviously, the first place to which I should turn was AID. We made very little progress. And I guess if ever the time comes when anyone would care to go through my ... communications to the State Department from Niger or from Senegal, either for that matter, they would find the word AID a sort of a leit motif; it runs through all those communications to the Department. I won't quote figures here; I've got a list of some of them.

But the thing the Nigeriens really wanted was a bridge, a bridge across the Niger River at Niamey. And my harping on that became, as a member of the White House staff under Kennedy told me later, became a cause celebre. It was something that was turned down and turned down, again and again. And remember now, all the millions that we were putting into foreign aid. And this was something, a project that would only cost two million, two million dollars. And with all the billions that you read about in the papers nowadays, you wonder if two million was not a pittance.

And at the last part of my stay in Niger, the AID people finally saw the light and they built this bridge, or rather they lent the ... oh, by that time the bridge cost three million, because it had taken so long and everything was inflated.

And the Nigeriens promptly named the bridge the John F. Kennedy Bridge, which I think - well, that's another beautiful memory - and you see, one of the things that worried us most, when I say us I mean the American blacks, was that there was some question as to whether a black ambassador would have the same entree and the same kind of accomplishment potential that a white American ambassador would have. This was mentioned in newspapers. This was ... and it didn't apply only to Africa; it even went to a country like Haiti. I remember after I had been on a lecture tour to Haiti for the State Department, came back and the man in the Department said to me, an official said, "Listen, you know, we would like to appoint a black American librarian at our Cultural Center." He said, "Do you think the Haitians would accept it?" I said, "Would they accept him?" I said, "Well, the American Ambassador they speak the most of and have the highest regard for was Frederick Douglass, a black man in this country." It was under John F. Kennedy that a definite effort was made to break the roadblock that had stopped blacks from being appointed to positions in the Foreign Service, even in Africa and even in Haiti. And as some of you probably know, there have since been two black ambassadors to Haiti. I'll stop and let you tell me where I am and where I should go from here.

Q: Why don't you just carry on as you want and anything you've left out, I'll pick up on.

COOK: Well, my stay in Niger lasted three years, and maybe three and a half, from '61 through '64. And when I got ready to come on home leave, before the end of the three years, the President of Niger, Hamani Diori, or Diori Hamani, wrote a letter to President Kennedy asking him, pleading with him to let me come back. I have a copy of that letter here, but I won't bother to translate the pertinent paragraph, unless you think it would be germane. I might add for the ... the sake of unity that the same thing happened at the end of my sojourn in Senegal. President Senghor wrote President Johnson asking, regretting that I had resigned, that I had retired, and asking that my tour of duty be renewed.

Well, I came home on leave from Niger and the State Department asked me to be, or rather, the State Department, under President Kennedy, asked me to be a member of the delegation - Alternate Delegate to the General Assembly of the U.N., under Adlai Stevenson.

Of course, I was thrilled to accept, to get away from the AID issue for a few minutes, and I went to that. Personally, I did not accomplish very much. There wasn't very much that I could do, although I have letters in my files attesting to the work that I did. I was on the one or two items such as the Korean issue, that terrible Arab-Israeli issue. I remember Ralph Bunche, my old colleague, saying, "Don't go overboard on that issue." He said, "You know, there's a lot of argument on both sides," and such issues. But there was very little about black Africa that really played an important role in that particular General Assembly.

The important thing that happened, of course, was on November 22, 1963: the assassination of John F. Kennedy. This was a terrible blow to us and it was a terrible blow to black Africans. I remember coming out of the lunchroom that day when the word had just come over that President Kennedy had been shot in Dallas. And when I got outside, there was an ambassador from an African country, who will remain nameless, who had been, had a reputation of being anti-U.S., anti-American, and tears were streaming down his face. And he said to me, "Just see what they are doing to us." In other words, Kennedy had Africans, just as he had Afro-Americans, feeling that this was the dawn of a new day, and he was helping that dawn come to light. After a few months, I wrote the widow and sent her excerpts from communications, from correspondence that we had had from people in Niger about Kennedy's death. Can I read some of these?

Here's a letter from a lady in Niamey, an African lady, Nigerien, and I translate just a sentence or two. "The purpose of this letter is to present to you and your husband" - this was written to my wife - "our sincere condolences. The day that that sad event transpired, I thought about you all night, wondering if this would change your return to Niger. We wish peaceful rest, repose for the soul of President Kennedy, who is for us, we blacks. And if you have an opportunity, you will kindly present my sympathy to ... the sympathy of a Nigerien to her who was the First Lady in the United States."

Niger is an Islamic country, but the Niger Government requested two masses. And all of the top officials attended these masses. And this is from the Bishop of Niamey. He says, "Father Ryon has already given you our condolences on the occasion of President Kennedy's death. I insist on telling you how affected we have been in our thoughts and in our prayers by this mourning which strikes a great people, a great nation, and the entire world. President Kennedy marks the world, or, marked his place in the world by his spirit of peace, of justice and collaboration, and his work will continue for the good of us all."

From Mali's Ambassador to Niger: "Facing the tragic news of the premature death of the greatest statesman in the world both by his mind, his intelligence and his young dynamism, President Kennedy, who has fallen on the field of universal honor, disappeared to the regret of all humanity. And so we beg you to receive and to transmit to the aggrieved members of your diplomatic family the sorrowful condolences of the Mali Embassy in Niger."

And so it goes. The letter goes on; these comments go on for several pages more. This, of course, was a terrible blow to us. Well, I went back to Niger after my tour of duty at the General Assembly and ... my tour continued for another year or so.

There were one or two things that occurred that were not too pleasant. They had nothing to do with the way the Nigeriens or even the French accepted me. I think the French were at first a little suspicious for the United States to have an embassy in Niger. They felt that this was an attempt on our part to lure the Nigeriens from their former French colonial masters, and that we would come in with all kinds of aid of AID. You see, they didn't know the problem as I did and ... but the fact that I was a former teacher of French literature, and French language and French culture, certainly reacted to my advantage.

But the difficulty, if I can call it a difficulty, came from an American Senator from the state of Louisiana. And he came to Niger and I knew of the gentleman's background and of his feeling racially. And so I arranged for members of my staff to take him around, and, of course, he promptly put his foot in his mouth. There was a Jewish member of my small staff and I said to him, "Would you be kind enough to take the Senator and show him the sights in town?" I didn't want to embarrass the Senator by having him to break bread with me at the table. And so this young man took the Senator around and showed him what few sights there were in Niamey. It was a little town you know, only about twenty-five to thirty thousand people, and about two stoplights in town, at which the few automobiles would stop and the many camels would also stop when the light was red. But he was showing the Senator around and they came to our Cultural Center - small Cultural Center which had recently been opened - and the Senator asked, "Who built that?" And the young man from my staff replied, "Oh, the Lebanese, a Lebanese firm." And whereupon the Senator said, "Oh, yes, they're just like the Jews in our country, aren't they?" Well, it wasn't a very tactful remark to make.

The President did not see the ... Senator but he did have one of the Ministers to talk with the Senator, a very, very, very unhappy meeting. The Senator met the complete staff of the Embassy. Of course, I was there to introduce him since no bread was to be broken at the time, and the Senator, incidentally, told one member of my staff, he said, "You know, my father owned a plantation and when he died the Negroes cried." And my comment was, not to the Senator but to the member of the staff who relayed this to me, I said, "Yes, but it's possible to cry for joy as well."

At any rate, we had this little meeting of the staff and here was this Senator who had never been to Niger, who knew nothing of our problems, who sat there and tried to dictate what we should and should not do. Should we really subscribe to the New York Times which cost the State Department too much money? You know, one subscription to the New York Times. Well, at any rate the staff backed me up. That was the most disagreeable experience I had during my time in Niger.

One highlight of my tour there was the visit of a man named Franklin Williams, a black American who later became Ambassador, U.S. Ambassador, and is now president of the Phelps-Stokes Fund. I had trouble convincing the head of the Peace Corps that we needed a Peace Corps in Niger. This is the kind of country that a Peace Corps should be serving. And I asked Sargent Shriver, the head of the Peace Corps, before I left Washington, if we could have a Peace Corps. Now I said to myself, well, if I put the number low then I had more chance of getting it. So Mr. Shriver said, how many Peace Corps volunteers could we use? I said, "We'd like to start with six." Well, I was turned down. There was no possibility of it, as you know. They wanted, they wanted big, large groups to make more impact I suppose, since ... to be more helpful to the country but , at any rate, I thought if we would start small, but finally we got six.

Mr. Williams, Franklin Williams, came down, I forget exactly what his title was, but he came down and it was thanks to him that the project continued. Not only did it continue but the last time I went to Niger, there were something like one hundred Peace Corps volunteers there doing all kinds of useful things, and ... I believe that it was one of the most successful projects in West Africa of the Peace Corps.

Well, as I say, there were many other things. Culturally Niger did not offer many opportunities, but we did have a lecture at the high school, which was the highest educational institution at that time. They since have a university, a budding university. Ah, but Saunders Redding, as you know, a black American author, lectured at the high school, and, on the lighter side, we had an evening with Cozy Cole and his orchestra. Very successful. We had two evenings with him, as a matter of fact. Both packed to the doors, standing room only and thoroughly enjoyed, particularly because Cozy Cole was a drummer and the Nigeriens as Africans, you know, pride themselves on their drumming. The drums are everywhere and they seemed to recognize every beat of Cozy Cole as something that really came from Africa, and it probably did.

What else can I say about Niger? I can say only that the people were wonderful. The president of the country, who has since been overthrown, the president of the National Assembly, who was the one distinguished scholar and writer in Niger, were wonderful people. We had visits, of course, from Governor Williams, who was then Assistant Secretary of African Affairs at the Department of State. He paid several visits to the country. And for Niger's independence celebration, President Kennedy sent a delegation headed by Arthur Goldberg, who was then Secretary of Labor, and including two of my former friends: one a former student, Frank Montero, and another a former colleague at Atlanta University, Samuel Nabrit.

Here I mention something that happened during the independence celebration. Secretary Goldberg was received by President Diori Hamani, and I was there to translate. One of the first things that Secretary Goldberg said was, "Mr. President, my President would like to see you. He has to see so many people he doesn't want to see and you're one person he wants to see." Diori was such a friendly person, giving no government any trouble, really, and Diori's eyes lighted up at this invitation. And when he left the office, I asked Mr. Goldberg, I said, "Did President Kennedy authorize you to invite President Diori?" "Oh, no!" was Goldberg's answer. "But I'm sure that when I get back he will back me up." Well, no invitation came. And to give you ... enable you to appreciate the kind of man Diori was, he never mentioned it to me after that invitation, which had made him so happy, deliriously happy.

That's the sort of thing that came to us. So you see the difficulties that we had in Niger came more from Washington, from AID, from the Senator. And as a matter of fact, Secretary Goldberg was decorated by the Niger Government after he left. Well, I'm all mixed up now so I don't know where, can you sort of ...

Q: Yes. You covered quite a bit. I wanted to go back and talk a little bit more about U.S. presence in Niger, Senegal and The Gambia. You were fortunate to serve in the early days of independence of these countries. Can you talk a little bit about the U.S. Government's attitude towards these countries?

COOK: I think the U.S. Government, I think they must have had, as I look at the AID disbursements, they must have had some kind of, of system that would relegate these countries to a position, I don't want to say inferior, but there, there were more, obviously, more countries, some countries that were larger or more important to U.S. interests than these smaller countries.

When you think of Nigeria, which at that time, I think, had a population of over fifty million people, and compare it with Senegal with its four million, Niger with its three or four million, The Gambia with three hundred thousand, you do not expect them to occupy the same rank as a country like Nigeria, as a ... well, at the time, as a country like Ethiopia (Haile Selassie was still in charge there) or as a number of other African countries, but the United States wanted to be a presence there.

When I got to Niger, the only Americans were these missionaries whom I mentioned earlier. That was not true in Senegal. I mean the U.S. had had a consulate in Dakar for years but they never had a resident consul or ambassador in Niamey. So there was really no comparison. The American Consulates, the U.S. Consulate in Dakar, was just changed into an Embassy - could I go back to Niger for a minute?

There's one very nice thing that happened that I failed to include, because I'm not speaking from notes. Or, let's say, I have the notes here, but I'm not following them. In the cable offering me the post in Niger, the statement was made that there is no residence for an Ambassador. But you would be put up in a hotel until we could build a residence or unless you could find some housing, private housing.

So my wife and I were put up at the Grand Hotel. It was grand in name only. But it was the best public accommodation that Niger had to offer. We had two rooms in the Grand Hotel and we stayed there one month, two months, as long as five months, which, of course, hampered us a bit, because it made entertainment somewhat more difficult than it would have been ordinarily. And President Diori said, "Listen, I have a villa that is not being used. Why don't you take it?" In the meantime, nothing happened on the residence which was supposed to be built, although I think they had bought the land. And Diori said, "This will be free of charge." I said, "No, I can't accept it on that basis." I said, "Would you permit us to pay for certain remodeling to be done on the villa?" And he said, "Well, all right. You can do that," he said, "but no rental."

And so we stayed there for the rest of our tour in Niger. When I went back to Niger to see the opening of the John F. Kennedy Bridge, we had a beautiful new Embassy, complete with swimming pool and so forth, so it takes time for those things. But I mention this incident to show what kind of person was at the head of the Government and how happy he was to see one of his "congeners" is his French word, appointed to his country by the United States Government.

I have another story that I must tell you, and this again takes me back. I was in the State Department for briefing before I went to Niger. And I got a message one day that Niger's Ambassador to the United States was coming in. He had an appointment with Chester Bowles, who was then Under Secretary of State, but before he went to see Chester Bowles, he would like to talk with me. And this tall, Nigerien, Issoufou Saidou Djermakoye, strode into the office, first of all to tell me how happy his President, whom I had met just briefly a year or two before, and the president of the National Assembly, how delighted they were that I was to be coming to Niger. And then he went on to tell me that he and his wife and son had just had a grievous experience. They had been driving to Washington from New York on Route 40 at that time; this is 1961. Route 40 was noted because despite the law, many of the places on the roadside would not serve blacks.

Well, Ambassador Djermakoye had stopped in this little restaurant and had been refused service. And he was coming to tell Chester Bowles about it and see if the State Department couldn't do something about that situation. Well, by then it was time to go to see the Under Secretary. Do you know that Ambassador Djermakoye spent one-half hour talking to Chester Bowles about everything except that incident?

And as we left Chester Bowles' office, I said to Djermakoye, "Why didn't you mention the affront on Route 40?" He said, "This was not the right time. I had to let him know how happy we were that you are coming to be the U.S. Ambassador to Niger." There again I think you begin to feel - Well, Djermakoye now is on the staff of the U.N., in New York, but he still has that same lovable character, and that's my story up to there. Now where do I go from here?

Q: Can we talk a little bit more about Senegal?

COOK: Oh! Of course, we ...

Q: ...Senghor...

COOK: Well, we can talk about Senegal, and I needn't tell you that it was almost like coming home to be appointed to Dakar. I had met President Senghor in 1934, when he was a student in Paris and I was a student in Paris. And we had continued that friendship down through the years. He had invited me to Senegal on several occasions, either to meetings or merely for, well, for personal reasons. Also, I got there in the summer of 1964 and, naturally, there was a crowd at the airport, including reporters.

And one of the first questions was, "What is the racial situation in the United States?" Well, I told them. This was now President Johnson, of course, and some of them knew President Johnson because he had been sent over by President Kennedy when he was Vice President, to attend, to be the official representative, our official representative at the independence celebration of Senegal.

And I said I was representing a President who had done many things to help the racial situation in the States and who would be doing, I felt, many more. Remember that a big law, an important law, had been voted in 1964. I said, "I am the father of two sons and (at the time) five grandchildren." I said, "And I believe, I believe that they have a better future ahead of them than I had ahead of me when I came along." I said, "If I did not believe that, I would still be teaching school and I would not have accepted this position."

Well, that was the opening of that particular visit to Senegal, and it was followed by two and a half years, the same struggle which I had in Niger started all over again with AID. If you will just bear with me, I'll just quote one statistic. This is the AID program in Africa, 1964. Now the first year I got there, Senegal got about two million dollars in U.S. aid. The second year I was there, 1965, Senegal got seventy-five thousand dollars in aid; that's opposed to Nigeria's fifty-three million. I don't believe that Senegal should have gotten anything close to that, but certainly she deserved more than a country like Chad, Upper Volta, Niger, Dahomey.

Well, at any rate, and the last year I was there, 1966, Senegal got 250 thousand. So, I still had then the same problem of convincing the AID people that there were projects in Senegal that were promising enough to deserve a little more generosity, particularly since much of that generosity is a two-way, works on a two-way street.

Senghor, of course, was hospitality itself. He welcomed me. When I presented my letter of my credentials, I mentioned our former friendship and how in 1934 he was telling me about the beauties of Africa, the beauties of Senegal, the importance of Senegal, the future of Senegal. And I was telling him what he most wanted to know about the writing scene, the writers, black writers in the United States. As early as 1934, I was amazed to hear him quote, by heart, poetry by Langston Hughes, by Sterling Brown, by Countee Cullen, by Claude McKay and by other black American writers and poets. That, of course, was the first side of Senghor that I had noted. And that, of course, had been continued and had developed. Incidentally, in his autobiography he was asked what books, if he were on a desert island, like Robinson Crusoe, what books would he take with him? And the fifth book he put down there was Langston Hughes' first book of poetry, *The Weary Blues*, which, as you may remember, was published back in the 1920's.

There were some, as I say, there were some Americans, a few Americans in Senegal, not many in business, but there were small businesses. There was, incidentally, was a black American who had opened a restaurant there, and then Senegal was much closer to the mainstream than Niamey was. And so they knew what the situation was, and, as I say, they'd had American consuls there for many, many, many years. But the AID program was still sticky and, frankly, in that respect, I was not able to do very much for Senegal.

We did, however, help with what is one of the most unforgettable experiences in my lifetime. We helped with the first Dakar festival, the first festival of black arts which took place in 1966. I was disgruntled about the AID program, and so I had sent in my retirement. This was the third time I resigned from the Foreign Service: in Niger, and in Senegal. And then the Government asked me to stay on at least until after the festival, because I had been working on this project since 1956, when we first met at the conference in Paris, to which I alluded earlier. So I was staying on then until after the festival, and the festival was something that was well worth the while.

As I say, this was an unforgettable experience, with at least forty countries, many of them African countries, sending their best artists, their choral groups, their dance groups, their orchestras to participate in this great get-together. And I was proud that my country was able to participate. We sent some of our best artists. Well, I start with Duke Ellington and his band, tremendously successful; Alvin Ailey and his dancers, tremendously successful; Leonard de Paur and his choral group, a biracial group, tremendously successful; Marian Williams and her gospel singers, and, believe it or not, they sang in the Cathedral of Dakar. A singer, one of our singers from the Metropolitan, I think her name was Martina Arroyo, tremendously successful. Right on down the line it was success after success. Duke appeared in public three times, and, of course, the President was there. Incidentally, the President, in a poem written back in early 1930, mentioned Duke in one of his poems and so you can imagine how happy he was to see Duke; you can imagine how happy he was to see Langston Hughes at the festival.

One interesting sideline about the festival concerns Langston Hughes. The President called me one morning and said, "Emperor Haile Selassie is here, as you know, and we're having him for lunch. Langston Hughes, back in 1936, when the Italians were invading Ethiopia, Langston Hughes had written a poem, *An Ode to Ethiopia*. I translated it, and I'd like to read my translation at the lunch." He said, "I'm sending over by messenger a copy of my translation and would you ask Langston if he approves?"

So the messenger came bringing the poem. I read it over the phone to Langston Hughes and Langston said, "Now that's a beautiful poem." He said, "The only trouble is I didn't write it."

So I called the President back and he said, "Could you bring Langston over?" And I said, "Yes." So, I brought him over. And the President said, "You published this poem in *Opportunity Magazine*, *Opportunity Magazine* such and such an issue. And then Langston said, "Of course I did ... (slaps his forehead)!" He said, "Now I remember. It was for a public manifestation at Madison Square Garden."

Incidentally, that luncheon attended by, well, the main guest of honor, of course, was Emperor Haile Selassie but was also attended by Langston Hughes, the diplomatic corps and a number of Senegalese officials, including the President. And the President read that translation of the Langston Hughes poem. Oh, there are so many things that I could say about, about Senegal.

Q: Would you talk a little about the political climate there?

COOK: The political climate was ... as far as the cold war went, the political climate was not bad, but as far as the internal situation was concerned, there were problems. There were problems because, if I could go back in history a little bit, during French colonialism, Dakar was the capital of eight colonies, including Senegal, and Niger, and Ivory Coast, and Dahomey, and so forth. There were eight of them. And that confederation, if it could be called that, had its headquarters in Dakar. Dakar, as far as health was concerned, as far as weather was concerned, as far as beaches were concerned, Dakar was the ideal place. And so the French selected Dakar.

Well, that meant that Dakar was the administrative center and they had to hire a lot of people to take care of eight colonies. With independence and the breakup of each of those eight countries, Dakar was left with a tremendous staff of government employees to support, to maintain, to pay salaries to, you see. And yet they were servicing only a small, let's say one eighth of the former French-West African Federation in West Africa. So that the financial pinch was terrible.

Remember that Senegal, like Niger, Senegal's main product was peanuts. Now it's true that they also had phosphates, but if you look at the budget, incoming and outgoing, you could see that peanuts by far outranked phosphates. Phosphates only brought in 6 million dollars in import whereas peanuts went up to 81 million dollars. And remember that the per capita income in Senegal was only about, was less than two hundred dollars a year. It was higher than some African countries, but it was certainly not much, considering the prices that you had to pay for those goods that were manufactured in France, you see. France proper profited from some of the raw material that came right out of Senegalese soil but sold it back to Senegal for prohibitive rates.

So that this, of course, had a bearing on the political situation plus the fact that there was some unrest in the University, unrest among the younger people who wanted progress to come faster than it could be forced upon this impoverished country. Other than that, I think the situation was good. Although, remember in 1962, there was an attempted revolt, and in 196 ... I guess about 1967, there was an attempt on Senghor's life. Fortunately, the gun did not fire, but there was that attempt. And, as I say, it misfired and Senghor was able to go on until 1980, when he felt that it was time for him to retire.

Q: You mentioned briefly the invitation that was extended to the President of Niger but was never followed up upon by President Kennedy. I don't know if you want to talk about why you feel this didn't happen, but, in any case, would you let us know whether or not President Senghor received an invitation to the United States? How was he perceived by the U.S. Government?

COOK: First, I want to continue with the Diori story, President Diori's story. I don't know why he never got the invitation. Maybe it was because Secretary Goldberg was shifted to the Supreme Court, you remember. No wait a minute, wait a minute, it was the other way around...

Q: He went to ...

COOK: ... he went to the U.N.

Q: ...but after...

COOK: ... yes, maybe it was because it was, I think he went to the Supreme Court, yes! And maybe that had something to do with it, or maybe other problems were more pressing. But Diori did come over as a guest of Lyndon B. Johnson later on. I was no longer in the Foreign Service at that time.

Oh, yes. President Senghor was invited by President Kennedy, I think, the very first year of President Kennedy's Administration. He came back a few years later under President Johnson. And, interestingly enough, President Johnson sent an invitation through the Ambassador while I was there in Senegal. Senghor is such a scholarly person. He said, "I cannot possibly go there this year. I would have to spend months studying the situation in the United States so that I would know how to meet it when I went over there." But the year after I left Senegal, President Senghor did come over here and, incidentally, that was the year he received an honorary doctorate from Howard University, 1966, at the end of 1966.

Q: You spoke of the resignations that you submitted while you were in the Service. Would you like to elaborate on those?

COOK: I don't have much to say about them. They were all caused by the same thing. The inability to get aid and AID was not forthcoming. I felt that this was setting a bad precedent for future black ambassadors, for the possible appointment of future black ambassadors, because there had been this question in the beginning: Can a black U.S. ambassador get the assistance that these countries need?

When I first got back to the State Department for briefing, I told Governor Williams - Assistant Secretary Williams then - I said, "I'm surprised I'm the only one of my complexion down here. I thought there'd be some, some others." He said, "Well, there will be." And I found that there were. But the reason I, tried to resign three times was that I didn't want it to be a stain on the discussion. Of course, you know that there have been more, not enough, but there have been more, and there's even been an ambassador to the, to the U.N. from our group.

Q: Do you feel that you received any advantages because of your color while you were serving as Ambassador?

COOK: I think so. I think so. I think the rapport that I had with Boubou Hama and Hamani Diori in Niger and my long friendship with Senghor in Senegal, I'm sure those things helped me. I had many friends in Senegal before I became ambassador. I'm sure that ... that was a great help. I tell you another ... one incident that was not helpful ... (slight giggle) ... where my color didn't help too much.

In Senegal, now remember that I had had difficulties with a certain Senator when I was in Niger. When I was in Senegal, one day my public affairs officer came in and he said, "Oh, I just saw the man from Reuters News Agency and he tells me that a certain Southern Senator is planning a trip to Senegal. And so the newspaperman, the newspaper people here are just sitting back to see how the black ambassador is going to get along with the Dixiecrat, with the former Dixiecrat. So immediately I cabled the State Department asking to be on leave when this particular Senator came and I got a response, "Oh, no, no, no, you have to be there; you have to be there." This, well I said, "Well, I could be out of Dakar. I could just be in some other town in Senegal. A visiting Ambassador is supposed to be traveling around in the country, you see." "No, but we'd like you to be here ... at the time."

So I wrote back. This was a very insistent statement that I got, that I had to be there. And I said, I wrote back and said, "No, I will not be there. And I'm willing to accept the consequences." Somehow or other the State Department got the Senator to cancel his trip. At least he postponed it for as long as I was in Senegal. Because you see the situation that could have developed? The man had a reputation for racism, and I certainly was not going to be there. That would have demolished any respect that the Senegalese would have had.

Q: Ambassador Cook, you had such illustrious parents that I feel it really essential we talk about them. You are the son of Will Marion Cook, who was a composer, and Abbie Mitchell, who was an outstanding singer and actress. Would you talk a little bit about them, please?

COOK: I would enjoy talking about them much more than I would enjoy talking about a diplomatic career and fighting with AID. You can bet on that! No, really.

I had two wonderful parents. My dad was, back there I think he was born in 1869 - right on the campus of Howard University where his father was working - and he grew up in Washington. He went to Oberlin Academy and studied violin; then he went to Berlin and he studied under a famous violinist, Joachim, came back to the States and he gave a concert at Carnegie Hall. And the paper said: "This is the greatest black concert violinist." And he broke up his fiddle because, obviously, there weren't other black violinists, concert violinists in those days.

So he went into popular music and his first show, one of the very first ever to hit Broadway with our people in it, was a play that he did with Paul Laurence Dunbar doing the lyrics. It was called Clorindy: The Origin of the Cakewalk, 1898. And that was his first real success.

Other successes came later. For years he wrote most of the music for the Williams and Walker shows, Bert Williams and George Walker. And then he was a conductor of the Clef Club Orchestra, with their famous Carnegie Hall concert in 1912, which brought Dad's more serious numbers into the public realm. That was when Schirmer published such choral numbers as Swing Along, Exhortation, and Rain Song; and a number of other compositions.

Dad had written, of course, many songs in a much more popular vein than that. But just after World War I, he took the New York Syncopated Orchestra to London and played nine months in the same theatre in London.

But in 1925, when you walked up and down the streets of Montmartre in Paris, that's the nightclub district, and you saw a black musician, you could almost bet that he had been in Dad's orchestra in those days. And he married a little girl fourteen years younger than he, who showed up to try out for the chorus in his - first show, Clorindy, in 1898. They married; they had two children: my sister, three years older than I, who has now passed. But the little girl got to be quite a singer and an actress. She studied, she studied all her life. I wonder if she ever really finished high school, but she certainly did study to make up for it. And despite not having gone on with education, with formal education, she sang over most of Europe, throughout this country. She taught for a while; she taught at Tuskegee for three years; she taught voice. Then she took private students in New York and then when she, well, it was the Lafayette Stock Company, she played one of the leads in the Lafayette Stock Company for about five years.

Then, as she grew older, she got into a number of stage productions where she would have to take minor roles. There was a play called *In Abraham's Bosom*, in 1926, which won the Pulitzer Prize that year, starring Rose McClendon, Mother, Abbie Mitchell, and Frank Wilson. Then she got in many of these other plays, now. She was a maid, played the part of a maid. She was with Tallulah Bankhead in the beginning of *The Little Foxes*, which is now being revived. She was with Helen Hayes in *Coquette*. She introduced *Summertime* the first time *Porgy and Bess* opened, and she had a beautiful career: actress, teacher, singer. I feel very fortunate to have had parents like that, and I hope that they won't be forgotten. But I have only two recordings that my mother ever made. One is of the *Porgy and Bess Summertime*, and the other is one of my father's songs. So that's it.

Q: I'm sure they won't be forgotten. I have heard so very much about both of them. Would you talk a little bit about how they influenced you in your life's direction?

COOK: I don't know. I tell you one influence they had. They talked me out of going on the stage. That's one thing, because for blacks, no matter how popular, no matter how productive, in my childhood days the living was not easy. There were times, for example, when Dad would have so much money that he would buy two-hundred dollars worth of Christmas presents for my sister and me and promised me a pony as soon I was old enough to ride behind a pony on, in Central Park. And the next year he would be flat broke and I would ask about the pony, and I remember his saying that there isn't any Santa Claus. So I felt that what I should do was ... (laughs) ... to get a regular job. And so I went into teaching.

I think in that way they had a tremendous influence on me, but, of course, they also influenced me toward an appreciation for art and especially for appreciation of what the black man has to offer in art. Because Dad, way back there in the early days when he was starting out with, with George Walker, Bert Williams, Paul Laurence Dunbar, James Weldon Johnson, Rosamond Johnson, Bob Cole and those people, Dad insisted on the black heritage, on what we had to offer in the artistic world, to the artistic world, and I'm sure that was probably the reason why I delved into what the French-speaking black man had done artistically. And I had never thought of that connection before, but that probably was it, and Mother, too.

Q: You were born in Washington, DC?

COOK: Born in Washington because Dad's people were here and Mother's people were in New York. And she happened to be coming out here on a visit, and I decided that I'd make my appearance in the nation's capital. Maybe that was it.

Q: Were there any other people who might have influenced you? Relatives or friends? Teachers?

COOK: Oh, yes. But your tape isn't long enough to get all of those down. I was tremendously influenced by my high school. I went to Dunbar High School in Washington and my classmates included the late Judge Hastie, Allison Davis, our first professor at the University of Chicago - he's been there since about 1940, an author as well. And the teachers at Dunbar were there for the students. They gave you the feeling that you could do anything, you know. There were no limits.

Of course there was segregation in Washington. Washington was a deep South city in those days, but they just convinced you that, oh no, oh no, you have unlimited possibilities, you see. They carried that over, they brought that over, and it was embedded in us. People like Sterling Brown, W. Montague Cobb - Senator Brooke was a Dunbar graduate as well. The list of prominent Dunbar graduates would indeed be.

The teachers there, then the teachers at Amherst, particularly the head of the French Department, who came into the library one day and came over to me and he said, "If we get you a scholarship to," and scholarships were not easy to get in those days, "If we get you a scholarship to Paris for next year, will you take it?" I said, "Yes." I had hoped to go to law school, but I would certainly not turn down an invitation, a chance to go to Paris for a year to the University of Paris. And so that's how, that's how that happened.

And another French professor at Amherst who was from Alabama, Anniston, Alabama, told me in later years that he often wondered what he would do if he had a black student, a Negro student, in his classes. Would he be able to call him mister? And he said, "Then I found myself, without difficulty, calling you Mr. Cook. and" ... (laughs) ... "there was no problem about it." And when my son, my older son graduated from Amherst, this professor and his wife invited us to stay with them when we came up to the commencement. We didn't stay with them; we could have. And we knew that we would have been welcomed, but that man, too, had influence on me.

But, I think Carter Woodson had an influence on me. Carter Woodson ... and there are so many names I just can't mention them all. I wish I could give credit to some of them. Among popular musicians of my dad's period was a man named Luckey Roberts. One year I dropped out of college because my father and mother were in Europe and I was tired of washing dishes. Luckey Roberts was a great popular - we called it ragtime in those days - ragtime piano player and also a composer, he did a number of Broadway shows and music for them, and his biggest popular hit was a song called Moonlight Cocktail, which was very popular here some years ago. That year I dropped out of college because my parents were in Europe and Luckey Roberts just kept on insisting, kept insisting, "You've got to go back, you've got to go back." And when I found out how few opportunities there were for me if I didn't go back to college, I finally understood what Luckey Roberts was talking about. And I went back to college like that (snaps fingers). That was a crisis in my life. But as I say, I just can't mention all the influences and I'm sure I've overlooked many, and I thank them all.

Q: You've been very generous. I just want to impose on you by asking one more question while we conclude this. Do you have any words of advice for future young blacks who are contemplating entering the Foreign Service?

COOK: I think it's a worthwhile career. And maybe the dangers as suggested by what happened to our hostages in Iran, maybe the dangers are there and maybe they're heightened in recent years. But I think it's a wonderful career, and I think that now for the first time we are ... our need, or the need for black Foreign Service Officers is becoming recognizable, although there may be temporary setbacks. But I think it's worth it.

My younger son was headed for law but first he got into the Foreign Service. He only served one post abroad and that was Guadalupe, one of the most beautiful posts. He was very fortunate. And then he went on and finished his law courses. But I was glad that he had started out in it, because it's a good training ground even if you don't go ahead in it. But I think it's a career that has enabled us to show that we have something to offer in a field which had been lily-white for so long.

Q: Thank you very much, Ambassador Cook.

COOK: I thank you.

End of interview